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ACCUSED SPIES NOT SOPHISTICATED, JUST WELL PLACED, EXPERTS SAY
BY William M. Welch
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Intelligence experts outside the government say the spy ring John A. Walker Jr. is accused of running doesn't appear to be highly sophisticated but that its members may have been in just the right position to pirate away damaging secrets.

Walker's apparent zeal for his secret life, as alleged in federal indictments, prompted one former CIA official to describe him this way: "He was Walter Mitty."

But unlike the fictional milquetoast who imagined a famous life, Walker is accused of acting out his fantasy as pointman for a ring selling Navy secrets to the Soviets.

The four charged so far, all current or former Navy men, were not of particularly high rank. But, according to intelligence experts, their involvement in Navy communications, submarines and carriers means they had access to a wide range of secret message traffic.

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"In the intelligence trade," said former CIA officer George A. Carver Jr., "there are no secrets more secret, none you want to protect more, than those dealing with communications."

"There are few things for the U.S. government more sensitive than the means and methods and procedures of communications within nuclear ballistic submarines on patrol," added Carver, former deputy director of the CIA for national intelligence.

"They are one key leg of the nuclear triad ... and anything bearing on that would have been priceless to the Soviets and extraordinarily damaging to the United States."

Retired Navy Capt. James T. Bush, who now works at the Center for Defense Information, a group often critical of the military, said the ring could have passed information on how the Navy tracks Soviet submarines.

"Depending on how much technical knowledge they had, they would have had a tremendous ability" to pass on such secrets, he said.

Carver and other intelligence experts said U.S. officials must assume that the Soviets gained a wide range of secrets. As a communications officer at Atlantic Fleet Headquarters in Norfolk before his retirement in 1976, John Walker "would have been aware of everything flowing in and out of the communications center," Carver said.

The latest man arrested in the case, Jerry A. Whitworth of Davis, Calif., retired from the Navy in 1983 after serving as a radioman at Alameda Naval Air Station, Calif., and as communications watch officer on the aircraft carrier Enterprise.

"A radioman is terribly helpful to you," Carver said. "It's not the compromise of any single message. It's the compromise of techniques, signatures, call signs, frequencies. ..."

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Soviet access to Navy communications from within could yield clues to coding patterns of messages, which they could then use in analyzing U.S. communications intercepted electronically, they said.

Moreover, they say, the Soviets could have gained information on what techniques the United States uses to prevent detection of its own nuclear-weapons carrying submarines.

"We don't want them to know what methods we use to keep our subs from being tracked by them," said Carver, senior fellow at Georgetown University's Center for Strategic and International Studies. "That's maximum sensitivity with a capital M and capital S."

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John J. Greaney, also a former CIA officer, invoked the modern-day Mitty characterization of Walker based on press accounts of the retired Navy communications specialist who operated private detective agencies in Norfolk, Va., and is accused of being a spy for the Soviets as far back as 1966.

"I don't really feel as though it's a sophisticated net," said Greaney, executive director of the Association of Former Intelligence Officers. "... It seems extremely disjointed. Whether he really had control of it, I don't know."

Walker was arrested in a Maryland suburb of Washington after FBI agents said he dropped off a bundle of classified documents. A Soviet diplomat was seen nearby.

Greaney said such a "dead drop" is the most basic type of transfer in espionage and that the Soviets would want some face-to-face meetings with their spy if there was much "high-power" information involved.

"What kind of instructions he got from the Soviets, that's a key," said Greaney. "Were they giving specific requirements (for information) for him," Greaney said, or were they just "buying documents by the pound."

He said the damage may be serious because of the length of time it allegedly has gone on. "You're dealing with a tremendous amount of vulnerability to our operating forces, major operating military vessels," he said. "I feel as though it is very serious, primarily because of the exposure you've had."

Carver said, "It wouldn't have had to be very sophisticated to get priceless information."

Even though it has been more than eight years since John Walker left the military, Carver said clues to communications codings could still be of value today.

"Knowing what kinds of procedures we used even 10 years ago tells the Soviets where to start looking," he said.

Walker's son, Michael L. Walker, 22, was arrested while serving as a yeoman on the aircraft carrier Nimitz. John Walker's brother Arthur J. Walker, is accused of passing on documents while working at VSE Corp., a defense contractor in Chesapeake, Va.

Retired Rear Adm. Carl Seiberlich, former personnel manager for the company, said Arthur Walker didn't have access to any especially valuable information at the company.